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## THE WESTERN WHIPBIRD AT TWO PEOPLE BAY.

By H. O. WEBSTER, Albany.

The presence of the Western Whipbird (*Psophodes nigrogularis*) at Two People Bay east of Albany was suspected by me many months before it was at last verified. I heard strange and unusual bird calls in many places in the wilder country of deep gullies and wide valleys, but although I caught glimpses of the birds they were never seen clearly enough for certainty in identifying them. At last, on July 21, 1962, I watched a pair of these elusive birds for some time on the western slopes of Mt. Gardner.

Using binoculars, I observed them at close range and while one bird perched and sang with raised crest on a low bush, the other foraged for food in a larger clump nearby, answering the first bird with a short phrase of song at regular intervals. The strange, harsh song is, as John Gilbert said, "so different from that of any other bird I ever heard or am acquainted with, that I shall have no difficulty in recognising it again wherever I may hear it." Since that day whipbirds have been encountered all over the mountainous area at Two People Bay where they seem to be about as common as the Bristle-bird (*Dasyornis brachypterus*).

The song of these birds, which John Gilbert considered impossible to describe, is certainly difficult to render satisfactorily in words. However, some attempt must be made. First of all, both birds sing part of the complete song but not as a duet, i.e., simultaneously but rather as a verse and chorus. The male sings the verse and the female adds the chorus with such perfect timing as to make it appear that one bird only is singing. This is easily proved when the observer is between the birds. However, the male occasionally sings the whole song, chorus too, and an amusing variant sometimes occurs when the male ceases to sing his part for a few rounds but the female continues her part. Bristle-birds do almost exactly the same in their song cycle but with them sometimes the male sings the whole song and the female sings the chorus with him in a delightful duet. I suspect this happens when the pair have young newly out of the nest. Whipbirds vary the loudness of their song considerably, usually beginning so softly that the observer is led to believe the singer is some distance away. The song becomes much louder and it is amazing to discover how close the bird actually is.

A male begins and often sings his phrase a number of times before the female joins in, then the pair sing the same verse and

chorus over and over for as long as five minutes with the same regular, silent pause between each. When in search of these birds and the song is heard, it is necessary to make all haste to get close to them because a pair often will not begin a new song cycle for an hour or more and they are rarely located by searching for them. I have used the term "song cycle" to indicate a long series of repeated short songs which do not change or change very little from the beginning to the end of a series. Whipbirds do have differing songs which take the same deliberate repetitive form and one, very approximately rendered in words is:—"It's for teacher." Chorus, "Pick-it-up" (female). Variant:—"It's for teacher." Chorus, "O" (as in not and really a double note).

The tea in teacher is strongly stressed on a higher note than the rest and the whole song is noteworthy for its strict rhythm. There are small variations in any series such as leaving parts or notes out but still retaining the same relative timing. I have been able to distinguish at least four of these song cycles, all similar yet definitely different. A pair of Whipbirds when close to each other often make a clucking sound similar to "chutch" and occasionally may be heard giving low, guttural sounds as if "talking" to each other. I have, as yet, not identified territorial song for certain but the long song cycles almost certainly play this part and pairs appear to hold territories all the year round. The alarm call is a loud, harsh, continuous, scolding note.

It was only a few weeks after the confirmation of the presence of the Whipbirds that a nest was found under construction. Whipbirds were noticed several times on a very open slope which was covered with low, thick scrub, some clumps of larger bushes and a few small sheoak trees (*Casuarina fraseriana*). The birds were seen always near one of these trees and on investigation a very fine nest made of long slender twigs lined with finer ones was found in the centre of a large "Drumstick" (*Dasyopogon bromeliaefolius*) clump. This nest, found August 12, 1962, contained no eggs but appeared to be completed. It was about twelve inches above the ground and well concealed. Eggs were laid on August 18 and 19, the second and final egg being laid between 12.30 and 4 p.m.

The birds sat very close, being quite difficult to drive off the eggs towards the end of the incubation period. One egg hatched on September 9 and the other proved infertile. The single young bird was covered in very dark, rufous down. This makes 21 days of incubation and the young bird was gone from the nest by September 22. No further nests were found in 1962 and, in spite of careful searches, none were located in 1963. Luck changed on August 9, 1964, when a bird carrying food was seen and after a search of about two hours a nest with two young was found. This was in all ways similar to the first nest but it was placed in a very thick, dead prickly bush that was almost hidden by new growth and was about three feet above the ground. The young birds were gone from the nest by August 22. Photographs taken at the first nest were not



successful but an interesting series was obtained in black and white and colour at the second nest.

Both birds share in the incubation of the eggs and the feeding of the young. At the first nest, behaviour was amusing as several times the sitting bird was most reluctant to leave when the incoming bird gave a low call from nearby. If, after several such calls, the bird did not leave the eggs, the other bird entered the clump and the sitting bird then went off. At both nests the female often fed the young, then stayed close by until the male approached with food. He always called when he was returning, beginning some distance away and the female responded with low calls as he got nearer and nearer. She then slipped away to forage. She gave a subdued call, obviously directed at the young as she returned and they soon replied with quite loud and harsh, food-begging calls. The ordinary call of the young was a soft, almost continuous cheeping which was very difficult to pinpoint. The food fed to the young appeared to be soft-bodied insects but as no observations were made when the young were more mature, it is possible that small lizards and other small reptiles could have been given. The birds did not call at full volume at any time near the nest, but were not afraid to perch on the exposed tops of nearby bushes, often raising the crest and spreading the tail. They run along the ground a good deal and also travel through the bushes. Though the wings are short, these birds fly quite strongly and well but perhaps a little clumsily.

Thus the third member of a strangely baffling trio of Western



The Western Whipbird (*Psophodes nigrogularis*).

—Photo H. O. Webster

Australian rare birds was noted as an inhabitant of the remarkable flora and fauna reserve at Two People Bay. The three, *Atrichornis clamosus*, *Dasyornis brachypterus* and *Psophodes nigrogularis*, are extraordinarily similar to one another as John Gilbert said long ago. All three have similar strong legs, feet and beaks; all have short wings and comparatively weak powers of flight but astonishing speed of foot. All have tails graduated in length, capable of being spread into a fan shape and capable too of being erected, wren-fashion over their backs. Again, all three are dull coloured, spend all their lives in thick vegetation, either low scrub, thickets or in the heavy cover of deep gullies, and are so wary and make such skilful use of cover that it is always a triumph to see a bird clearly and closely for more than a few seconds at a time. It is quite possible for an unwary observer to confuse Bristle-birds with Scrub-birds and it is necessary to be thoroughly familiar with the females of both species in order to identify them with certainty in the field. The Scrub-bird is the master strategist and I have never caught one unawares but the Bristle-bird, while running him very close, is also full of curiosity and one of the most confirmed "stickybeaks" in the bush. Whipbirds, by contrast, seem to pay little attention to an observer unless he is clumsy when they glide silently away and usually do not call again for a considerable time. Incidentally, not one of these birds is truly ventriloquial, but all regulate calls with great skill.

The photograph is, I believe, the first to be published of *Psophodes nigrogularis* and was taken on August 15, 1964. It is almost certainly of a male bird.

## THREE NEW WESTERN AUSTRALIAN PLANTS AND SOME NAME CHANGES

By A. S. GEORGE, Western Australian Herbarium, South Perth.

In the following contribution appear descriptions of three distinctive new additions to the flora of Western Australia—two new species and one new subspecies. *Melaleuca coccinea* is one of the "Bottlebrush" type, having large red flower spikes. It is so far known only from the Eastern Goldfields. *Verticordia patens*, from the Mogumber-Moorabie district, is a yellow-flowered species with a tall, open habit. *Banksia laevigata* subsp. *fuscolutea* occurs to the east of Hyden. It is distinguished from the typical form by the flowers, which have a bright yellow perianth limb, the remainder being clothed in a ferruginous indumentum.

Three species require new names under the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature. *Acacia aurea* and *Grevillea rufa* were later homonyms (i.e. bore the same name) of previously described species, while *Kunzea sericea* was a name based on a valid species of *Leptospermum*.

### 1. *Melaleuca coccinea* A. S. George, sp. nov.

Frutex ramosissimus ad 1.7 m. altus. Ramuli et folia juvenes pubescentes, mox glabri. Folia decussata sessilia, ovatacordata, obtusa vel acutiuscula, concava, 4-10 mm. longa. Flores coccineae, in spicis densis lateralibus; rachis